N.B. Human Rights Commission

International Day of Disabled Persons (03/12/02)

NB 1148

Dec. 2, 2003

FREDERICTON (CNB) - The following statement was issued today by Dr. Patrick Malcolmson, chair of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission, to mark the International Day of Disabled Persons, Dec. 3:

December 3 is the International Day of Disabled Persons. This day was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1992 to celebrate and acknowledge the experience and capabilities of people with disabilities.

This occasion reminds us of the important work being done within the UN system to develop a global Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

It is also an opportunity for individuals, businesses and governments to ask themselves what they can do here at home to remove the barriers faced by persons with disabilities. These barriers are often physical, such as steps that block access to wheelchairs, but they also include attitudes, such as stereotypes, prejudices, inflexibility and thoughtlessness, as well as policies that don't take persons with disabilities into account.

The New Brunswick Human Rights Act prohibits discrimination and harassment based on mental and physical disability in employment, housing and public services. It is the most common type of complaint, accounting for 42 per cent of the cases handled by the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission in 2002-03.

Examples of disability include addiction, AIDS, depression, diabetes, epilepsy, injury, learning disorders, paralysis and reliance on a guide dog.

Many of the complaints involve a failure to reasonably accommodate the needs of disabled persons. It is not enough for employers and service providers to treat disabled persons exactly the same as everyone else. Instead, they must accommodate their needs so that they may access genuine equality.

Individual assessment, flexibility and reasonableness are the keys to understanding the requirements of the Human Rights Act. Depending on the circumstances, that might mean wheelchair ramps, sick leave, teaching aids and adjusting job duties, for example. However, employers and service providers are never required to undergo undue hardship or to sacrifice their legitimate objectives.

In the commission's strategic planning process, disability was identified as one of the key areas upon which its educational programme will focus. This priority reflects the number of complaints received by

the commission and the higher unemployment rate of persons of disabilities, as well as the loss to the labour force of valuable human resources.

In the year ahead, the commission will continue to promote dialogue among employers, unions, health care professionals, disabled persons and other key stakeholders in breaking down the barriers to job access for New Brunswickers with disabilities. The commission also welcomes feedback on its draft, Guidelines on Accommodating Physical and Mental Disability at Work, released this summer.

On Dec. 3, I invite New Brunswickers to challenge the barriers faced by persons with disabilities not just as violations of the ideals of fairness and human rights, but also as obstacles to our economic development and prosperity as a society.

03/12/02

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